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# Empathizing with the Slave; Empathizing with the Slave-owner

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# Empathizing with the Slave; Empathizing with the Slave-owner

## Abstract

Living inside of the world of the past is often the most difficult thing an interpreter can help her audience to do. But, in spite of its difficulty, it is the most necessary. The adage that before you insult a man, you must walk a mile in his shoes is correct. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

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## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

## Comments

*Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public* is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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THURSDAY, MAY 26, 2011

## Empathizing with the Slave; Empathizing with the Slave-owner

Living inside of the world of the past is often the most difficult thing an interpreter can help her audience to do. But, in spite of its difficulty, it is the most necessary. The adage that before you insult a man, you must walk a mile in his shoes is correct. [1]

[https://www.ted.com/talks/sam\\_richards\\_a\\_radical\\_experiment\\_in\\_empathy](https://www.ted.com/talks/sam_richards_a_radical_experiment_in_empathy)

But how do you go about feeling the world from another's perspective? Recently I ran across this TEDx talk by sociologist Sam Richards on understanding the viewpoints of someone you might despise, and at very least can't readily relate to. It's 20 minutes but worth watching every second:

So how does this work with the Civil War? Well, certainly we can quite easily see it in an instance where we ask our visitors and audiences to empathize with a slave's perspective. You build the case, placing the audience member in the shoes of the slave and helping them to understand the abject hopelessness of being trapped in a system of oppression. You use a few modern analogies of working hard but not earning a dime for that work. You offer them a moment to feel the uncertainty that at any moment your family can be broken up on the auction block. You try to help them feel the helplessness of being unable to support your family, being subservient and dependent on a master for the smallest details of life.

Feeling the pain of the slave is relatively easy for me to imagine, because I already commiserate with the slave. But how do I feel empathy for the slave-owner? To me, slave-ownership is synonymous with pure evil. How can you wear those shoes?

A friend of mine did it this way: imagine yourself a hard working white laborer in the American South. You work in a hourly job in an industrial center, a larger city. Your wife stays home and minds your household. There is no running water; there is no washing machine. Everyday, she walks to the local water pump and draws pails of water, hauling the gallons of water back to your home to



Imagine living under the constant threat of being sold away from your family.

PD / [LOC LC-USZC4-2525](https://www.loc.gov/loc/USZC4-2525)

wash the clothes, do dishes and cook the family's meals. She works hard, even though you are a middle class family. She has callouses all over her hands from the back breaking labor.



Slavery could just as easily be found in the home of a Southern man like this as on a large plantation or farm.  
PD / [LOC LC-USZC4-3948](#)

You care about this woman. Your wedding anniversary is coming up and you've been saving away spare cash here and there. It's taken a long time. But now you can buy your wife a meaningful gift. You can buy her something that will make a difference in her life. You can buy her something that says, "I love you." You can buy her a slave: another human being.

Now watch in your mind's eye, as the work she does is cut in half each day. Another pair of hands to chop wood, to haul water, to wash the dishes. And watch the callouses fade from your wife's hands.

My friend Dave used to tell that story, highlighting just how easily normal people could become complicit in an evil system. The process of moral justification becomes shockingly natural. Through this example, Dave helped me to understand just how a good, moral person could become entangled in slavery and could justify it to their own soul.

This one works for me. Dave used it quite often, and it seemed to resonate with many audiences. I'm sure it won't work for everyone. Your mileage may vary.

Still, perhaps we need to take a page out of Sam Richard's book and try to see the world from the shoes of those we perceive as wrong or evil. After all, as George Santayana more than likely first said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I would add that those who cannot understand why evil has crept into the world in the past are doomed to let it creep into their own worlds.

Thanks, Dave, for helping me to see the value of stepping into other folks' shoes. Empathy is perhaps the most powerful tool for historians.

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1. This is chiefly so that when you do insult him, you are a mile away and you have his shoes. Sorry, couldn't resist...